DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 301 915 CS 506 506

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TITLE Ten Proposals and One Modest Proposal for Excellence in Public Relations Practices.
PUB DATE 13 Nov 88
NOTE 24p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Public Relations Society of America (Cincinnati, OH, November 11-13, 1988).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Ethics; *Professional Recognition; *Public Relations; Standards
IDENTIFIERS *Excellence; Professional Behavior; Professional Concerns; *Professional Ethics

ABSTRACT

It is time to address the nature of excellence within the public relations profession. The following ten proposals can guide the profession in its search for the meaning of excellence: (1) to determine the meaning of excellence, and whether public relations practitioners desire to transcend or exceed the norms of conduct; (2) to study excellence as it relates to the management of change; (3) to study excellence in terms of leadership; (4) to seek new methods of finding and rewarding leadership; (5) to search for new types of excellence, including ethical excellence based on democratic principles; (6) to let excellence be a guiding concept for the development of a public relations philosophy based on local human facts; (7) to study secrecy and advocacy as potentially contributory problems of excellent conduct in public relations; (8) to study excellence in terms of the relationships between codes of ethics and actual behavior; (9) to study the relationship between public relations practitioners and the practice of public relations, in terms of the public's responsibility for excellence, and their accountability in communication; and (10) to include the public in the debate and rewards for public relations excellence. A final "modest" proposal is perhaps the most significant proposal for this profession: that all public relations practitioners become ethicists; that they be the voices of conscience and truth wherever they work, whatever messages they deliver; that they become advocates for ethical excellence for employers and clients and for themselves and the profession. (Twenty-three references are attached.) (MM)

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TEN PROPOSALS
AND ONE MODEST PROPOSAL
FOR EXCELLENCE IN PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICES

BY

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This paper was presented to the Educator's Section, Public Relations Society of America, November 13, 1988.

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When, in 1729, Jonathan Swift put forward his "Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People from Being a Burden to Their Parents or the Country, and for Making them Beneficial to the Public,"[1] his fine irony, couched in the most sensible of arguments, showed that it would be to the advantage of the Irish people and the Irish nation to fatten up the infants of the poor to be sold by the age of one year to persons of quality and fortune.

In developing his proposal to make succulent dishes of infants' flesh, Swift was, of course, using his essay to emphasize the follies of humanity. Swift's proposal, termed "modest," was designed to use reasoned arguments which, although eminently sensible, ultimately shock the reader, presumably into new thought patterns.

His modest proposal, Swift said, had many benefits for rich and poor; for men and women; for tenant and landlord; for the Irish nation in general. How could one resist his arguments? Selling their babies before they reached 13 months would relieve the poor mothers of having to beg for food or become homeless wanderers. It would save them from having to raise "bastard children" who could not learn to work but instead would become part of the underclass of thieves or terrorists. But Swift thought of more than just the welfare and the homeless families of his day. He segmented his publics; enumerated the advantages to everyone: landlords would benefit because the poor tenants would finally have something of value to sell so they could pay their rents; women would benefit the most because they would not have to resort to voluntary abortions and their men would treat them far better since their economic welfare would rest on women's good health and productivity. On and on, the benefits are stated by Swift, the only problem being the basis upon which the entire premise rests: our taboo against eating children. What one needs to do, of course, is look beyond the rational and reasonable arguments of wonderful propositions;

thus, for excellence in behavior, seeking the basis upon which the behavior rests. To apprehend whether it is possible to build an edifice of excellence upon the foundation of Public Relations is our Swiftian approach to the subject.

As Swift began his "Modest Proposal," so, too, begins the modest proposal for public relations excellence:

> It is a melancholy object to those who consider the subject of excellence in public relations, when they see the sneer upon the face of the television host or journalist of the print media in mentioning the very name of our occupation, or discussing the importuning of public relations practitioners from members of the public media. These practitioners instead of being able to work for their honest livelihood, it is said by the members of the media, are forced to employ all their time in begging to obtain sustenance ... and therefore whoever could find out a fair, cheap and easy method of making them sound, useful members of society would deserve so well of the public, as to have his statue set up for a preserver of the nation.
>
> Having turned my thoughts for many years upon this important subject, and maturely weighed the schemes of many others, I have found them grossly mistaken. I shall now therefore humbly propose my own thoughts, which I hope will not be liable to the least objection.

The right of human beings not to be eaten or to be harmed--whether it is by their very own tribe, religious group, family, nation or others--is one commonly accepted as having political, religious and humanitarian bases. Dewey, one of America's great educator-philosophers, stated that all rights are to be treated as phases of the development of social consciousness, or phases of the social will.[2] He classified three principal rights: Life, property and expression which, like the organic relations of mind and body, must go together. Through the right to life, one controls the body as an organism and the protection of that body from all the influences which would tend to destroy it or in any way weaken it. You must not kill a person, you must not, as Swift ironically suggested, cut off the potential of the infant to grow. And in the world of environmentally-conscious populations, you must not maintain nuisances that are obviously detrimental to one's health. The current expression of this idea has

been popularly stated to show that society is responsible for hygienic conditions and the well-being of individuals; that work is to be done under conditions that are healthful; that life is to be lived free from pollutants.

But life is not purely and only the physical element of the human being. There is the psychological--the thinking element of the human being. There is individual and societal consciousness. The brain is part of that physical being and a healthy, unpolluted thinking brain is as necessary to life as the other appendages of one's body. The brain is a vital tool of life. Part of the environment for ourselves, our families and all human beings is the provision of education and a healthy environment for the mind as well as the body. The rights of human beings include not only not to be eaten physically, but not to be given poor quality, "rotten" ideas with which to feed one's brain.

The right to property and the right to expression are natural outgrowths of the right to life. The right to property represents the right to life through the environment and the capacity to embody an idea in material form. The right to expression, Dewey called the rights of conscience and of communication; the right of the individual to choose his own form of religion, the right to free speech, free thought. Ideas are embodied often in material forms and often the original psychical meaning becomes so wrapped and tied up in the material form that it becomes necessary to go back to the original and free it, give it range, allow it freedom of expression, and in doing so, understand it.

When the concept of excellence appears shining in our professional practice as the shining grail for our entire Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), when excellence is the focus for some fourteen thousand persons, and when PRSA awards Silver Anvils based upon "honoring excellence," it is evidently time to address seriously the nature of excellence and to consider where it leads. Allowing for freedom of expression, albeit ironic, brings us to a philosophy of public relations practices that relates to the words, deeds and thoughts of other

groups and individuals who have also pursued excellence, so that we may derive standards or bases from which to judge whether we fit the word and its generally-accepted meanings in any professional, academic or business world.

The practice of public relations is said to be so closely related to the organizations, institutions and individuals it serves, practitioners of public relations must understand the workings and the worlds of employer/client services and products.[3] In preparing to communicate on behalf of client or employers, public relations practitioners must not only adhere to some standards of excellence for themselves as individuals and as an occupation, but must adhere to the various standards of the clients or employers they are empowered and charged to represent. Each group has its own ideas and words to express, to wrap up the ideas that give form to the reality of how it approaches the goodness or excellence of what it does.

Practitioners of public relations must, therefore, not only cope with their own professional group's approach to the concept of excellence, but must respect the standards and concepts of excellence that have come through to us from practitioners and philosophers of many areas and eras. To approach the essence of excellence in public relations mandates our understanding of the currently accepted meanings of the word and the history of the concept of excellence.

A standard definition[4] places excellence in the generic category of actions. To be better than; to surpass; to outdo; deriving the word from the Latin excellere, to excel--raise up. The verbs synonymous with excellence mean to go beyond a limit or standard, usually in the sense of being superior and generally applied to performance or achievement in things that reflect credit on the performer. To excel is to be preeminent in a general sense, or to be or perform at a level higher than that of another or of many others in a specified area. To surpass another is to be superior in performance, in quality or degree. There is

a virtue or fineness connected with excellence so that one could say that excellence is the state of being of the highest or finest quality.

Synonyms such as exceed or transcend have other implications that move beyond the bounds of excellence as a concept. The word exceed can, like excellence, refer to superiority in quality, but it is most often applied to what is greatest in sheer size or quantity. Transcend usually refers to marked superiority in quality or degree, but most often it implies attainment of a level so high that comparison is hardly possible. Examples of the differences from excellence might be: "you have exceeded your authority" or "great art transcends mere rules of composition."

The likelihood is that when we refer to excellence in public relations we are looking at the raising up of standards; the excelling in performance and achievement that reflect upon the individual and upon the entire profession as a group. We may not yet wish to transcend the norm of rules of conduct or to exceed our authority or capacity to perform.

PROPOSAL 1. To determine with some certainty what we mean by excellence and whether we do or do not desire to transcend or exceed the norms of conduct.

What do others consider excellence? Two occupations are cited here: banking and education. The banking industry was studied[5] when it was noted that not one bank was included in the Peters[6] study of excellence of America's best-run companies. After searching for methods of comparing the various sectors and types of banks—commercial, wholesale, retail, and their many demographic characteristics—the choice evolved into an examination of banks by: values and culture, strategic direction, products, customers, organizational structure, leadership—especially the role of the chief executive officer (CEO); approach to human resources—the care and planning for reward and performance of staff; and risk control.

Excellence for the banking industry is said to include extensive communications on both vertical and horizontal planes, with open culture as a base for effective decision-making; a communication used to unite complex organizations. A strong sense of shared values, but maintenance of focus on bottom-line performance as generic, whether profit maximization was seen from a long-term vs. a short-term. But the key to banking excellence was said to be the customers around whom the banking functions were organized, by segmented marketing techniques. New products, well supported, were seen as beneficial. Leadership, however, was primary. Even without strategic planning documents, leadership by the CEO or management board took the bank on specific courses of action. And leadership included recruiting the "best people" but training them on the job. The bank CEOs are most concerned about getting the right people to maintain their excellence by improving communications, managing products properly and training top executives to carry on the tradition of excellence. Ultimately, in banking, excellence of performance was seen as focused in the response to change: the management of change equals the maintenance of excellence.

In almost precisely the same words as are found in the study of excellence in banking, a study of the American system of education describes it as excellent insofar as it responds to the management of change.[7] The process of managing change is one that calls for knowledge of society's goals and the shifts of these goals; i.e., from equity of access to academic and technical achievements. Crises in education are caused directly by social policy and public opinion when educational policy makers follow society's dictates too little and too late.

Excellence in education is almost always equated with reform movements. Reforms calling for excellence or some other well-intentioned but vaguely stated goal have rarely succeeded. No one has ever quite been sure how to measure such attempts at excellence, since in education, more often than not, broad-ranging, vaguely articulated aims, however admirable, end up promoting contradictory

practices that not only undermine intended goals, but often subvert pre-existing programs of proven worth. It is the commitment of leadership in education that strongly affects the outcome of excellence and reforms. Calls for change unaccompanied by strong leadership do not affect practice.

PROPOSAL 2. Study excellence as it relates to the management of change.

Specific lessons in the management of change are available to be studied. Understanding the spectacular efflorescence of science as begun in the 19th century carries specific lessons for the conduct and organization of effective excellence.[8] The growth of science depended on the growth and metabolism of society in general and the development of all fields of scholarship. Science bloomed where there was an adequate system, designed to support scholarship and the pursuit of interesting ideas that add to man's basic knowledge, plus a system that aided researchers to do this sooner rather than later, and to make a large difference to the state of knowledge of their field. The availability of means, of time, of collaborators, of encouragement by colleagues, stimulus of new results, all of which keep morale high; open invitations to talent, aid given from student days forward for continued education; encouragement of inflows of bright young people and a sense of building on the contributions of others.

By supporting educators, research, students—through invitations to talent in all of the scholarly and practice routes at their means—PRSA is apparently attempting to follow in the type of path that encourages excellence as demonstrated by the flowering of science. Clearly, excellence and leadership are synonymous. The idea of excellence is one that is shared by all civilizations, but the notion of what is the current best varies over a wide range—excellence appears to be a moving target. What governs and in fact creates the idea of excellence is society's vision of reality; that which it considers to be true.

PROPOSAL 3. Study excellence in terms of leadership.

There is a distinctly American historical and social experience of leadership that shapes an activist's world and that has pervaded and become the common property of the world outside our boundaries. Pluralism of culture, religions and ethnic backgrounds are the backdrop against which one best views American standards of excellence. Our standards shift and vary. We do not always agree about what the good person is, or the good leader, but we do seem to agree about who may be a gifted and talented person. That alone can explain much of our concept of excellence in terms of competitiveness and achievement since the triumphant fulfillment of tasks is what Americans seek. The type of talent admired varies. It may be the banker who no longer risks all, quickly, to satisfy the current customer; it may be the educator who no longer seeks total equity but focuses on new technologies; it may be the physician who has become the social activist developing standards of care for the financially disinherited. It may, indeed, be the quintessential American activists: The Olympic athletes realizing super-skilled performances.

Leadership is a useful kind of excellence to recognize in a democracy. It is inevitably in short supply. So the most natural way to recognize leadership is to make ever greater use of it. Money is not always the reward for leadership, except in certain circles of business or professions; and even there it may not be the measure of the pinnacle of achievements. Further opportunities to exercise leadership is one way of recognizing and rewarding leaders. But it may also be antithetical, as we give heavier responsibilities for managing more or larger enterprises or extracurricular work to those who lead us. This may become as much of a distraction as a reward.

Leadership is the kind of excellence most explicitly recognized in our nation. McClelland states that Americans have a system for encouraging excellence.[9] The best students go to the best schools and then on to the best

jobs. That is practical and appealing to the American sense of achievement. But there are types of excellence that do not show up early in careers, but will obviously merit rewards. As, for example, persons who do good daily work, or those who show entrepreneurial spirit and are resourceful and successful in business although they may not have been at the top of their class. There are also persons of special talent capable of linking unusual ideas or whose social sensitivities and imagination are beyond a given norm. We need, then, to encourage a variety of types of excellence, beyond our measurable action-oriented achievement focus.

Public relations practitioners appear to be succeeding at leadership by taking over top corporate enterprises. Yarmolinsky[10] says the top leadership of large corporate enterprises has passed from the engineer to the lawyers and seems to be passing now to the public relations expert; but in each group the quality drawing recognition is extraordinary individual energy and the ability to organize the energies of others. Hyperactivity is the common thread, according to Yarmolinsky, that runs through the diverse careers of those who receive explicit recognition for excellence in our society. On the way up they are super-energetic, and as leaders at the top they continue this. Sheer stamina is a prerequisite for the highest of our ranks. We begin our functional recognition of leadership at least as early as high school. Extend it to extracurricular activities throughout careers. But the primary focus of leadership is the requirement of an organization to be led, and a system that recognizes leadership.

PROPOSAL 4. That we seek new methods of finding and rewarding our leadership.

There is a Greek proverb that equates happiness with excellence. It is in this proverb that we might look to rewards for our leadership in PR: "Happiness lies in the exercise of vital power along the lines of excellence in a life

affording them scope." PRSA's growing pool of potential retirees, educators and practitioners who are eager to share their knowledge with students and with colleagues are the individuals who, as a community of leaders in PR, can exercise vital powers and who should be rewarded by the profession. Recognition can be given in many forms to the varieties of excellence shown by leaders. It is perhaps the best use of the growing pool of PR talent, such as the proposed "Fellows," to reward them with new leadership programs to be developed.

PROPOSAL 5. That there be an active search for new types of excellence, including ethical excellence based on democratic principals.

We may equate the doctor advising the patient on treatments; the scientist placing facts about food additives or tobacco before the general public; the journalist reporting on a press conference; the government official talking about the nation's capabilities. But can we equate these with the public relations practitioner? All of the groups enumerated have special bodies of knowledge. In the newly-minted PR Body of Knowledge, the public relations practitioner's body of knowledge appears to be an amalgam of areas of skills in persuasive communications. But democracy rests on speakers and bearers of information who do not make final decisions for hearers. Bearers of information, such as public relations professionals, must allow people to reach their own right decisions. A primary focus of democracy is the need to continue to protect the rights of publics against misuse by those who have information. Such protection requires the highest standards of ethical and moral excellence. In suggesting a new approach to excellence the concept is of performance reflecting credit on the performers, based on unflinching knowledge of the means, methods and the rationale for the performance itself. If infants are not to be eaten because that practice is inherently against the right to life, it may also be said that information is not to be so transformed that it transgresses the right to free speech and thought.

PROPOSAL 6. That exellence be a guiding concept for the development of a public relations philosophy based on local human facts--a practical philosophy.

A philosophy is a system of motivating concepts and principals; it is also the love and pursuit of wisdom. For PRSA and for all practitioners of public relations, philosophy can be a pursuit of wisdom by intellectual means and moral self-discipline. There have been, over the centuries of philosophical debates, two principal approaches to the pursuit of wisdom. One is the search for universal truths, the other the search for truth in local facts.

Today's practical approach to philosophy stems from Aristotle's "Nicomachean Ethics." Aristotle felt that it was appropriate to look at the conditions on which, and ways in which, arguments carry conviction as part of a philosophic debate. Arguments and their soundness depend on formal relations among propositions; they can be approached from local human facts. What facts may be included should be familiar to sophisticated public relations practitioners: what is the nature of the audience to be addressed; in what forum is the argument put forward; and what is the nature of the arguments.

Plato is the model for universalist views. He found that arguments did not rest on local views or human facts, but on the "proofs" captured in writing and judged as written rather than framed--as PR practitioners do-- within particular situations, specific people, dealing with concrete cases and with many different elements at stake.

Aristotle said, in terms of particular evidence or cases, that the good has no universal form; regardless of the subject matter or situation, sound moral judgment respects the detailed circumstances of specific kinds of cases. This case-method approach to philosophy may give the feeling of being "demeaned" by not being part of the universalist fundamental truth search. But today, philosophers are drawn into the debates on ethics and the applied or situational ethic is a practical debate in which they have engaged themselves.

Practical debates are philosophy embodied as itself.[11] By entering on practical philosophical debates, PR will not demean itself but will contribute to a productive new direction from which it can only benefit and profit as it engages with the concepts and activities that produce excellence in public relations.

An example of how practical philosophies can be conceptualized, as public relations might follow it, one might look at the medical experience in which a clinical diagnosis is made based on the practitioner's accumulated experience and knowledge, along with the signs and symptoms available at the time of the diagnosis. The diagnosis is thus open to revision and rebuttal as the case unfolds and the illness changes; the physician works from what is known as the practical situation.

PRSA might use practical philosophy to reward with Silver Anvils the program and persons contributing to ethical and excellent conduct in difficult situations. Excellence is not only in the Johnson & Johnson Tylenol program, but with the persons who, having faced policies of deception or secrecy or having seen through a lie, have faced their dilemma and worked it through in a manner to be considered ethical excellence. Excellence is also with those who, having witnessed the problems facing the practitioners, are capable of thinking the "unthinkable" and wrestling with issues of practical and philosophic importance to the entire profession.

PROPOSAL 7. That secrecy and advocacy be studied as potentially contributory to problems of excellent conduct in public relations; that the roles of public relations practitioners be studied not only as they serve functional purposes, but as contributory to the specific moral and ethical conduct of practitioners.

While pursuing the concepts of public relations excellence, we inevitably come to the universals that must be thought through and that can well be

approached from the case or local facts methods. Secrecy is an example. It is a major component of public relations practice. The tension between publicity and secrecy is inevitable. That tension can be reduced by stressing for ourselves the moral choices and ethical decisions about secrecy. The moral arguments about secret practice must be capable of being publicly discussed.

To debate such issues as secrecy and advocacy in the practice of public relations does not mean we must reveal our employer's or client's secrets case by case. But it does mean that we must reveal that the issues are there to be discussed and debated for our own benefit, as well as the benefit of those served—publics such as media channels of communication. In such debates, we would be in the arena with investigative journalists, physicians, the military, and person who deal in trade or corporate secrets. There is a necessity to articulate PR's position carefully, to defend it against unexpected counter-arguments, to take opposing points of view into consideration, to reveal the steps of reasoning used, and to state openly the principles to which one appeals.

Publicity is the word for placing facts and actions in the public eye. Many roles of public relations, such as publicity, embody the concept of presenting the best possible image of a person, organization or event. Publicity emanating from complete, designed programs of public relations is based on practical approaches to ideas and activities. These activities may include elements of secrecy, of manipulation, at times deceptions, and, perhaps, outright lies.[13] Whether it is the public relations practitioner communicating lies, bridging secrecy, or whether it is, deliberately or not, unseen by the practitioner, are all issues to be debated and placed in the light of our professional understanding.

It is time, Brown[14] said, for PR practitioners to stop being closet professionals, afraid to face the light of scrutiny, and he advocated a National Academy of Professional Communication, independent from any existing organization

in the field. He saw it as a forum for the establishment and enforcement of national codes of ethics, independent certification programs, research programs—all to pave the way for attainment of professional status through excellence, based on competence, and with representation in the formulation and administration of programs from management, academe, etc.

Equating competence with excellence mandates some agreement and public discussion of competence and the nature of the task accomplished through the public relations process. Not PRSA, nor any similar group, has yet achieved that goal. PRSA has only begun to look around the edges of competence, through such programs as the Silver Anvil awards. But the heart and nature of what is done when it is done by public relations practitioners has yet to be thoroughly publicly debated, or rewarded.

PROPOSAL 8. That excellence be studied in terms of the relationships between codes of ethics and actual behavior.

If too little is known about codes of ethics and their relationships to behaviors, in general,[15] to rely upon such a fragile set of documents and concepts for a total conceptualization of excellence in practice, public relations practitioners face their responsibilities to employers, clients, to publics, with little to sustain them in a quest for right-doing. The world of commerce, government and professions all are looking toward resolving questions of ethical conduct in terms of excellence of production of product or services.

Codes of ethics for the media evolved in two turbulent periods: in the 20s when trade associations and censorship boards and the beginnings of professionalism were in focus; the second during the Watergate period. For ten years there was a National News Council to provide a forum through which complaints against the press could be investigated and judged by a council of members of the public and press. The council dissolved for lack of support. But before it did, some studies were accomplished that might reflect on the role of public relations in terms of publicity and media relations.

Whereas the media, according to these studies, believe they are neutral and objective, the public thinks they are biased. Journalistic generalizations play a role in the public skepticism and their belief that there is distortion--and intentional and deliberate distortion--as part of journalistic practice. Whereas the media wish to be seen as uninfluenced and not shaping news stories, the public thinks otherwise.

Public relations practitioners may contribute to this dichotomy between what media believe they are and what may literally happen. This is a fundamental area of dissension that is at the heart of the dis-ease between public relations practitioners and journalists who suspect public relations practitioners as contributory to their troubles with the public as a biased news source. These are not questions of competence in writing press releases; these are questions at the heart of the nature of the public relations process.

Ethical conduct and competence of performance must be based on research and institutionalized into professions as they are taught even before they are practiced. Only then will the levels of responsibilities be sorted out and some answers be available as to the objectivity of information or the manipulation of information. But answers may come best from open forums between PR practitioners and their publics.

PROPOSAL 9. That the relationship between public relations practitioners and the practice of public relations be studied in terms of the nature of the public's responsibilities for excellence, and their accountability in communications.

Not only are audiences the key to receiving and understanding messages from mass media and others, there is a broad moral duty the public collectively has to supervise such social processes as communications.[16] It is through governmental agencies and educational institutions that the public most often asserts its collective responsibilities. Public relations has not yet been regulated, as have some areas of advertising, but this may be an area to study and watch.

The media and public relations get lumped together by Chomsky[17] as an industry of propaganda that understands its goal is to control the public mind on behalf of capitalist democratic institutions. Chomsky terms ours a sophisticated industry, working through popular culture mediums, including TV, advertising, newspapers, sports, news--all designed to make people feel that their only role is to consume and to approve decisions made by others--to make the American people a helpless, hapless, fragmented society. There is, however, a movement of dissent welling up within American society--including people who weren't even involved in the protest movements of the sixties and who were even hostile to those movements. Chomsky sees the current movement of dissent as still amorphous, spontaneous, with little leadership, but with surprising effects that may have some consequences for public relations. Suspicious of what they see, hear and read, those in the dissenting group are moving to pre-industrial communication, using couriers to tell each other what is really happening--not what public relations people say is happening. If the movement is successful, it will gather momentum and surprise even the most resistant into eventual action. What could happen when enough suspicion falls on our communications and public relations becomes a target for public hostility is, among other things, regulation, diminution of effectiveness or even cessation of message acceptance.

Democracy itself is at stake in this process of sending and receiving messages. Much of what is meant by excellence and accountability in the practice of a profession or occupation is based on the functions of the practice becoming so intertwined with the practitioners' relationships in the community that their humanness and expertise are inextricably intertwined. Their very words become the symbols and foreshadowing of actions. There are many groups and individuals in this nation, beyond Chomsky's amorphous dissenters, that have taken on the responsibilities of naming the world and speaking about it objectively; the Naders and AARP groups are focused on their realities of the world. PR has its own reality; but we have not agreed to what reality is now, or could become.

Of four possible levels of being "responsible for"—accountable, answerable, culpable, and liable—on which level do or should public relations practitioners function?[18] How are public relations practitioners called to account for their actions and at what levels of responsibility to selves and to community do they function? Enjoined by the PRSA Code of Ethics to keep the channels of communication unsullied, public relations practitioners must know the levels of practice that do or do not taint the mass media, and what PR's responsibility is when practitioners by-pass the public channels and use private communications vehicles.

PROPOSAL 10. That the public be included in the debate and rewards for public relations exellence.

Honors for excellence by professional groups are limited to the extent that they perform a primary, as distinguished from a reinforcing, function for recognition of excellence beyond the practice, and the limited extent to which the recognition they accord is generally recognized by others, even in similar fields. PRSA might establish an institutional channel to solicit public inquiry, respond to queries, and, indeed, encourage understanding of public relations honors for excellence.

In the debate about the practice of public relations, a question may arise as to the public's right to know and whether it is up to the public to determine what it shall think. Give the public the facts and allow them to think: This may be antithetical to the practice of public relations as it now exists; further, public relations practitioners may subscribe to the thought that the public deserves what it gets.[19] Public relations practitioners are not investigative journalists. But their original functional role as media specialists, conduits of information, not persuaders, might have been close to excellence and truth and the least prone to the shadows of secrecy, lies, and partial disclosures. The public may need to become more educated and analytically understanding of the communications before them. But PR needs to

know if the simple fact that advertising is recognized as bought and paid for could heighten the level of responsibility for the public relations practitioner in the eyes of the public. Reliance on objective, third-party persuasion and/or communication is a very different level of accountability. The abhorrence for subliminal messages may be a clue in the public relations profession's search for excellence; the relationships between what is said and not said may be the focus of the sly smile, the grimace, the word "ploy." Bringing the public actively into the process of rewarding excellence may be to open up the process itself and thereby achieve the most essential of rewards: Understanding.

A MODEST PROPOSAL: That all public relations practitioners become ethicists; that they be the voices of conscience and truth wherever they work, whatever messages they deliver; that public relations practitioners become advocates for ethical excellence for employers and clients and for themselves and the profession.

The question of the responsibility and voluntary nature of the actions of public relations practitioners is a major element of what must be debated and brought to light. Public relations practitioners are not passive subjects; they are capable of doing something about the world in which they work and live. Perhaps there is no justification for holding to the highest standards and demanding that public relations practitioners exceed the norm. But at least these interior views of the profession must be seen and examined.

Taking public relations actions to the extreme: perhaps one can, as in the Aristotelian view, be responsible for an action without being responsible for their character or traits of personality that cause one to act as they do. This would explain extreme actions and the activities of persons conditioned to be Nazi party members or any extremist group member. Such activities might be regarded as beyond the power of the individual to change or control; such a person could be held liable for stealing but not for being a Nazi. Perhaps

public relations practitioners are, similarly, being held responsible only for actions that breach ethical conduct considered the norm for public relations practice, and not being held responsible for conduct relevant to the broader societal standards.

The question evolves into how one should act in any given situation; how the group should conduct itself in the practice of public relations. If we follow Aristotle's ethics, public relations practitioners and the profession will act with wisdom. There is no simple answer to what public relations wisdom will consist of, except to state that it must take full account and appreciation of all the factors in the situation confronting the profession.

The modest proposal will not be capable of being accomplished until the research into our own concepts of who we are as practitioners and what we should do in our roles is studied and agreed upon. Truth as its own reward is part of what we can expect to accomplish. The practical philosophy of truth as it impinges upon ourselves, our communities, our employers, our channels of communication, is the locus of the complex truth for which we must grope toward excellence.

FOOTNOTES

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